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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3088
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2953
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000800

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: TWO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES DETAINED IN
TURKMENBASHI

REF: ASHGABAT 738

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Jehovah's Witness leaders recently provided details about the June 19 detention of two Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenbashi. The two women were picked up on the street, although it is not clear whether they were proselytizing or simply walking somewhere. They have been held in a facility typically used for overnight detention of intoxicated people and have had no contact with family members. Concerning the May imprisonment of two Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors, an appellate hearing has been set for June 30 in Balkanabat and the Jehovah's Witnesses are scrambling to find a defense lawyer. The Jehovah's Witness leaders suggested that government pressure against their group might again be on the rise. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On June 24, Political Officer met with Jehovah's Witness leader, Andrey Zhbanov, and his deputy, Aleksandr Zorin, to discuss the June 19 detention of two Jehovah's Witnesses in Turkmenbashi. The two women, Vera Nazarova and Lyubov Khodzhamuralova, were reportedly walking along the street when they were stopped. Zorin could not confirm whether the two women were proselytizing at the time they were stopped, or whether they were just going somewhere. He added that it was likely that they were proselytizing, but Zhbanov mentioned that Jehovah's Witnesses are also picked-up nowadays for no reason. Zhbanov said, regardless of the circumstances, the detainment was a violation of the women's rights. Nazarova and Khodzhamuralova were first taken to a police station and then to a facility for overnight detention of intoxicated individuals, where they have been held since June 19. There has been no outside contact with the women since their detention began.

¶3. (SBU) On June 20, the mother of one of the detainees went to the police to inquire about her daughter's whereabouts. She was told to ask at the Ministry of National Security (MNB). At the MNB, an official named Murat instructed the mother to write out what he dictated to her, after which her daughter would be released. The mother refused to write anything. The MNB official threatened that "if she continued to behave like that, she would be detained with her daughter." She then left the building. On June 22, the

mother went to the local procurator's office, only to be told that they didn't know about the case and that there was nothing they could do. As of June 24, Nazarova and Khodzhamuralova were still detained.

14. (SBU) Regarding the May 21 jailing of two Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors, Sakhetmurad and Mukhammedmurad Annamamedov, for refusing compulsory military service, Zorin reported that an appellate hearing is scheduled for June 30 in Balkanabat. The hearing was postponed for ten days to allow the Jehovah's Witnesses to locate a defense lawyer to represent the brothers. The court refused the Jehovah's Witnesses' request to provide a lawyer, claiming there was no one available. Zhbanov said the court should normally provide a defense lawyer, and that they need someone who at least knows how to conduct a defense in a legal proceeding.

15. (SBU) In connection with case, Zorin said the brothers' father had received a response to a telegram he sent to President Berdimuhamedov. The response came from the General Procurator's office and stated that the office found nothing incorrect about the judicial procedure that resulted in the brothers' imprisonment. Zhbanov said it was merely the type of assertion that a layperson could make, with no reference to applicable legal codes and articles. In his view, this suggested that the procuracy did not give the case serious consideration.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Although it is not clear whether the detainees were proselytizing or not, Zhbanov made the point

ASHGABAT 00000800 002 OF 002

that it does not matter because proselytizing is within their rights as citizens and not grounds for detention. Nonetheless, religious proselytizing is against the law in Turkmenistan. Such detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses happen randomly throughout the country, although less frequently in Ashgabat, and can occur both when they are proselytizing or not, according to Zhbanov. As such, it is not easy to find the reason behind a particular incident such as this, when at other times and places, Jehovah's Witnesses are not stopped. Zhbanov explained that the difficulties faced by Jehovah's Witnesses come and go in cycles, and suggested that government pressure on Jehovah's Witnesses might be heating up. END COMMENT.
MILES